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# Urban Pastoral and American Social Science: the Italian Presence.

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In 1890 Jacob Riis wrote his *How the Other Half Lives*. It was largely descriptive, with many photographs picturing conditions of the life of the slum. Incidentally, Riis did more than anyone else to make 'slumming' a popular sport. He made the city *interesting*, threw a romantic glamor over its life.<sup>1</sup>

We open with the Danish-American photographer's own testimony. Jacob Riis documented the poverty of immigrants in New York, often including their ethnic stigmata. In *How the Other Half Lives* (1890), Riis represented in the book's first half Italian, Jewish, German, Bohemian, Irish, and Black variants of what later became known as "the culture of poverty."<sup>2</sup> The second half of the book focused on the more general conditions of slum life in New York, especially for immigrant children. Thus, *How the Other Half Lives* has a bifurcated structure in its representations of urban poverty which can be portrayed both as ethnic specificity and as sociological generality.

The Italian presence in that binary structure may be the cement in the entire system. Urban sociology in the United States "needed" the Italian immigrants for imagery for "streetcorner society." Can one imagine "street scenes" without Italians? Jacob Riis referred himself to the "picturesque" quality which the Italian women add to the New York scene: "The women are faithful wives and devoted mothers. Their vivid and picturesque costumes lend a touch of color

1 H. W. Zorbaugh, *The Gold Coast and the Slum: a Sociological Study of Chicago's Near North Side* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, [1929] 1969), pp. 255-6.

2 C. A. Valentine, *Culture and Poverty: Critique and Counter-Proposals* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1968).

to the otherwise dull monotony of the slums they inhabit."<sup>3</sup> Having access only to black and white photography, Riis had to paint his colorful Italians with words. One senses in his texts the same spirit of the Northern European traveller-painters to Italy from earlier in the nineteenth century. "Picturesque" in Riis' writing is exclusively in descriptions of the Italians:

Certainly a picturesque, if not very tidy, element has been added to the population in the "assisted" Italian immigrant who claims so large a share of public attention, partly because he keeps coming at such a tremendous rate, but chiefly because he elects to stay in New York, or near enough for it to serve as a base of operations, but here promptly reproduces conditions of destitution and disorder which, set in the frame-work of Mediterranean exuberance, are the delight of the artist, but in a matter-of-fact American community become its danger and reproach.<sup>4</sup> ,

Here it is a clash between the "picturesque" colorism and the "matter-of-fact" of black and white reality that constitutes the Italian presence in America. Whether Riis was creating cliché or simply reproducing it is not the problem. His stereotypes of the different immigrant groups surely follow the well-worn paths of Anglo-American nativism, but Riis' graphic sensibility was superior to the WASPs. Was it his Danishness at work?

Jacob Riis' description of "the Bend" is by far the best expression of "local knowledge" in *How the Other Half Lives*. It is a literal case of urban pastoral, perhaps the first in American literature:

Where Mulberry street crooks like an elbow within hail of the old depravity of the Five Points, is "the Bend," foul core of New York's slums. Long years ago the cows coming home from the pasture trod a path over this hill. Echoes of tinkling bells linger there still, but they do not call up memories of green meadows and summer fields; they proclaim the home-coming of the rag-picker's cart. In the memory of man the old cow-path has never been other than a vast human pig-sty. There is but one "Bend" in the world, and it is enough.<sup>5</sup>

The genre of "pastoral," of which "slumming" is a modern urban variant, plays upon an imaginary "courtship between contrasted social classes."<sup>6</sup> In modern American poetry, William Carlos Williams may be said to have invented the genre of "urban pastoral," with at least one lyric making explicit the Sicilian roots of the genre. Williams composed a "Sicilian Emigrant's

3 J. Riis, J. *How the Other Half Lives: Studies among the Tenements of New York*, with 100 photographs from the Riis Collection (New York, Dover, [1890] 1971), p. 47.

4 *Ibid.*, p. 43.

5 *Ibid.*, p. 49.

6 K. Burke, *A Rhetoric of Motives* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1969), p. 1; L. Marx, *The Machine in the Garden. Technology and the Pastoral Ideal in America* (London: Oxford University Press, 1964), pp. 222-227.

Song." Most typically, however, Williams discovered aesthetic potential in urban poverty. The aesthetics, moreover, implied a politics. A tone of elegy accompanies Williams' urban pastoral:

When I was younger  
 it was plain to me  
 I must make something of myself.  
 Older now  
 I walk back streets  
 admiring the houses  
 of the very poor:  
 roof out of line with sides  
 the yards cluttered  
 with old chicken wire, ashes,  
 furniture gone wrong;  
 the fences and outhouses  
 built of barrel—staves  
 and parts of boxes, all,  
 if I am fortunate,  
 smeared a bluish green  
 that properly weathered  
 pleases me best  
 of all colors.  
 No one  
 will believe this  
 of vast import to the nation.<sup>7</sup>

In a quite different spirit, but contemporary with William Carlos Williams, we can read F. Scott Fitzgerald's ironic version of the urban pastoral. It is a scene from *The Great Gatsby*: "We drove over to Fifth Avenue, so warm and soft, almost pastoral, on the summer Sunday afternoon that I wouldn't have been surprised to see a great flock of white sheep turn the corner."<sup>8</sup>

Ralph Ellison has commented on the use and abuse of "pastoralism" in white representations of Negroes in America:

It (pastoralism) implies that since Negroes possess the richly human virtues credited to them, then their social position is advantageous and should not be bettered; and ... the white individual need feel no guilt over his participation in Negro oppression.<sup>9</sup>

Pastoral motives, then, are both literary and political. Ellison could borrow from Emerson the notion of "pastoral" in order to unveil its implicit social

<sup>7</sup> Wm. Carlos Williams, "Pastoral," in *The Collected Earlier Poems* (New York: New Directions [1938] 1951), p. 35.

<sup>8</sup> As cited in Marx, *Machine in the Garden*, pp. 361-2.

<sup>9</sup> R. Ellison, *Shadow and Act* (New York: Random House, 1964), pp. 86-7. The essay was first published in *Antioch Review*, 1945.

content: a kind of ideological self-deception. W. Sollors, moreover, cites a poem, "Happiness," by the Swedish-American, Carl Sandburg, which has Hungarian immigrants incarnating pastoralism.<sup>10</sup> I am proposing in this essay that Jacob Riis' photographic and textual representations of Italians in New York were primordial pastoralisms in American culture.

"Urban pastoral," as I use the term in this essay, does not refer specifically to "proletarian" literature. It encompasses rather the fascination, surprise, compassion, and horror which "the slum" represented for a bourgeois consciousness. Riis' book of photographs and his accompanying texts achieve a certain quality of urban pastoral, thanks to the presence of the Italians.

In Riis' rhetoric the unique stands out against the huge backdrop of the universal. The "old cow-path" is metonymous for "a vast human pig-sty," a bizarre genetic mutation to say the least! Riis walks along the Bend and conjectures what it might look like from a "bird's-eye view." Nevertheless, he assures the reader, "In its everyday appearance, as seen from the corner of Bayard Street on a sunny day, (the Bend) is one of the sights of New York."<sup>11</sup>

It is an ethnic tour he presents. The photographer walks along "the Bend," his eye taking in far more than can a camera set upon a tripod:

Bayard Street is the high road to Jewtown across the Bowery, picketed from end to end with the outposts of Israel. Hebrew faces, Hebrew signs, and incessant chatter in the queer lingo that passes for Hebrew on the East Side attend the curious wanderer to the very corner of Mulberry Street. But the moment he turns the corner the scene changes abruptly. Before him lies spread out what might better be the market-place in some town in Southern Italy than a street in New York—all but the houses; they are still the same old tenements of the unromantic type. But for once they do not make the fore-ground in a slum picture from the American metropolis. The interest centres not in them, but in the crowd they shelter only when the street is not preferable, and that with the Italian is only when it rains or he is sick. When the sun shines the entire population seeks the street, carrying on its house-hold work, its bargaining, its love-making on street or sidewalk, or idling there when it has nothing better to do, with the reverse of the impulse that makes the Polish Jew coop himself up in his den with the thermometer at stewing heat.<sup>12</sup>

"The Bend," then is a virtual trope, where the slum path turns from "Indoor" Jew to "Outdoor" Italian, from written text to vivid gesture, from sickness to health. Because he is visible, the Italian is intelligible. The Jew, in contrast, is opaque and incomprehensible, who speaks "in the queer lingo that passes for

10 W. Sollors, *Beyond Ethnicity: Consent and Descent in American Culture* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986), p. 30.

11 Riis, *How the Other Half Lives*, p. 49.

12 *Ibid.*, pp. 49-50.

Hebrew." Is this Riis' way of referring to Yiddish? "The Bend" contains the two contradictory forms of ethnicity in the New World, the Italian half that is known via sunny, romantic representations and the Jewish half whose sign is shadow and secret. Though he builds upon stereotypical doctrines in his description of both ethnic groups, Riis also verges on the poetic in the text just quoted. There is no single photograph that can capture fully the "inside" and the "outside." Nor is there a photograph that can walk the streets as well as Riis' concentrated narrative, but a fine example of Italian manifestation in Riis' photography is: "Feast of Saint Rocco, Bandits' Roost, Mulberry Street." This work, which has a little boy shadowed in the foreground, brings the Church interior out onto the New York Street. It expresses the "picturesque" in Italian immigrant life.

One could eliminate the most vulgar clichés from "The Bend" and end up with sociological perceptions. The Chicago School especially as represented in Harvey Zorbaugh, *The Gold Coast and the Slum* (1929), William Foote Whyte, *Street Corner Society* (1943), and Herbert Gans, *The Urban Villagers* (1962) all underscore the persistence of Italian village culture in American cities: "conspicuous continuity" would be a Veblenesque way of putting it. Whyte and Gans both use the Italian referent in the sub-titles to their monographs, thus balancing a broad sociological theme with a specific ethnic community. Italian Americans were not only picturesque, they provided American social science with ample and vivid data for generalization.

Harvey Zorbaugh's study of Chicago's Near North Side in the 1920s serves as a viable bridge between Jacob Riis' documentary and stigmatary method and subsequent professional urban sociology: between journalism and science perhaps. The Italian presence in Zorbaugh's book is definite. He maps the variegated ethnic and class composition of the districts, but without focusing exclusively on the Sicilians, they are nevertheless central figures in the descriptions. Zorbaugh emphasized the Sicilian background of "Little Hell"'s inhabitants.<sup>13</sup> The detail of Zorbaugh's documents concerning Little Hell far surpasses that of the other ethnic groups in the city. He opens his account with a general declaration:

Little Hell is an area of first settlement, an area into which immigrants have come directly from Europe, bringing with them their Old World tongue, and dress, and customs—persistent and divergent social patterns that condition the Sicilian's participation in American life.<sup>14</sup>

The native terms of the Sicilians, *contadini*, *gobelloti*, *campanilismo*, *paesani*, *sparlata* are included in the narrative—which impresses the reader with the

<sup>13</sup> Zorbaugh, *The Gold Coast*, p. 161.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 162.

persistence of the Sicilian community as well as the untranslatability of its culture. The Sicilian institution, the Mafia, occupies a key position in Zorbaugh's sociological guide to Little Hell.<sup>15</sup>

The village atmosphere of the Sicilian neighborhood is remarkable. Little Hell, wrote Zorbaugh, "is a mosaic of Sicilian towns:"

The colony centers about the church of St. Philip Benizi, and Jenner School, which is jealously spoken of as "our school." It has appropriated a "movie," which it has rechristened the "Garlic Opera House," West Division Street, the colony's principal street, is lined with Italian businesses and shops: numerous grocery stores and markets, florists' shops, the Sicilian pharmacy, undertaking establishments, cobblers' shops, macaroni factories, cheap restaurants, pool rooms and soft drink parlors which are the lounging places of the second generation, and the barber shops which have replaced the saloon as the center of gossip for the older people.<sup>16</sup>

It is striking that so much ethnographic description can take place with the "naked eye," from the vantage point of a sidewalk. Jacob Riis took naturalistic photographs and wrote caricatures. Harvey Zorbaugh simply made check-lists of the exotic. Naming the institutions was adequate for conveying a sense of the complex whole. In addition to the general method and theory of Robert Park's urban sociology, Zorbaugh followed closely the documentary method of W. I. Thomas and F. Znaniecki, *The Polish Peasant in Europe and America*.<sup>17</sup> Whereas the study of Polish immigrants led to individual family or life histories, Zorbaugh's documentary strengthened the impressionism of urban representations, what Louis Wirth would later call "urbanism."<sup>18</sup>

W.I. Thomas explained his choice of Polish immigrants for his study. He had received a grant of 50,000 dollars from an heiress in 1908 to conduct a study of "immigrant problems." Thomas wanted to choose a large group, and

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 171-3; H. S. Nelli, "Italians and Crime in Chicago: the Formative Years, 1890-1920," *American Journal of Sociology*, Vol. 74, 1969, no. 4. 373-91.

<sup>16</sup> Zorbaugh, *The Gold Coast*, pp. 164-5.

<sup>17</sup> R. E. Park and E. W. Burgess, *Introduction to the Science of Sociology* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1921), pp. 311-15; R. E. Park and H. A. Miller, *Old World Traits Transplanted* (New York: Arno Press and the New York Times, [1921] 1969), p. 145-59. W.I. Thomas was among the co-authors of this book. W. I. Thomas and F. Znaniecki, F., *The Polish Peasant in Europe and America*, 2 vols. (New York: Dover, [1918-1920] 1958).

<sup>18</sup> For interpretive stories of Chicago urbanism, see, L. Wirth, "Urbanism as a Way of Life," *American Journal of Sociology*, Vol. 154, 1938, No.1, pp. 1-24; M. R. Stein, *The Eclipse of Community: An Interpretation of American Studies* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1960 [rev. ed., 1972]); U. Hannerz, *Exploring the City: Inquiries Toward an Urban Anthropology* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1980); B. B. Lal, "Black and Blue in Chicago: Robert E. Park's Perspective on Race Relations in Urban America," *British Journal of Sociology*, Vol 38, No. 4, pp. 1987, pp. 546-66. J. M. Schwartz, *Reluctant Hosts: Denmark's Reception of Guest Workers* (Copenhagen: Akademisk Forlag, 1985), and *In Defense of Homesickness: Nine Essays on Identity and Locality* (Copenhagen: Akademisk Forlag, 1989).

that choice was reduced to three: Jewish, Italian, and Polish. Thomas' decision was candidly narrated:

I was now in a rather alarming situation. I had made positive representations, I had got a lot of money, I had promised a great (also big) work, and what was I going to do about it? I first of all went over to Europe to locate a suitable group, where good materials were available. The choice was between the Italians, the Jews, and the Poles. The Poles are very repulsive people on the whole, but there had been a movement for "enlightenment" and freedom that had developed many documents and masses of material on the peasant, so I decided to bore in there.<sup>19</sup>

Readers of Thomas and Znaniecki, *The Polish Peasant in European and America*, are impressed by the monumental scale of its documentation, with the result that the sociological themes are rather obscured. The book argues, nevertheless, for an empirical method in the social sciences which interprets the lives of persons who are otherwise described as a "mass." The "disorganization" of the peasant communities in Poland was the primary characteristic that the authors wanted to document.<sup>20</sup> The closely knit families were in a state of dissolution. That moral breakdown was reiterated in local newspapers, as well as in protocols of Catholic priests and social workers. Emigration was the result, not the cause of community disorganization. By focusing upon the Polish peasantry and immigrants, Thomas apparently felt no reason to describe the "picturesque" in Polish culture, as if it resembled the Italian immigrants. Nor did he have the problem of having to deal with the "marginality" of Jewish immigrant culture.<sup>21</sup> The Polish peasant immigrant was specific, yet materials from that group's well-documented life histories might provide evidence for a general theory of the migration problem. That is precisely what the donors of the 50,000 dollars intended with their grant to the University of Chicago in 1908.

The Poles thus served as the paradigm for the sociology of migration whereas the Italians and the Jews held privileged positions in American social scientific renderings of urban culture and sub-culture. Continuity and tight organization were the hallmarks those two groups.

The life on the streetcorner was Italian, transplanted directly from Sicilian village to American city. No journalist or sociologist could describe the Italian community as disorganized. Its charm and its danger lay in the intactness of Italian culture.

19 Thomas, W.I., "How *The Polish Peasant* Came About," as cited in M. Bulmer, *The Chicago School of Sociology: Institutionalization, Diversity, and the Rise of Sociological Research* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1984), p. 47.

20 II, 1134-40.

21 L. Wirth, *The Ghetto* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1929).



Jacob Riis' combination of urban pastoral and social "muckraking" was evident to Zorbaugh, and I shall suggest in this essay that the continuity and presence of Italian culture in the American city sustained also the sociological tradition, at least until the 1960s when Black streetcorner-society supplanted the Italian.<sup>22</sup> The method and theory which were developed in the study of Italian-American slums, however, persisted in the representations of the Black community. Participant-observation, requiring the trust of the community's members, gave access to the sociological reality. That trust for visiting white sociologists disappeared at the end of the 1960s with the outbreak of "civil disorders" in the Black ghettos. Ulf Hannerz' *Soulside* was probably the last book of its genre. A white and Swedish anthropologist was a participant-observer among young, Black men in the Washington, D.C. ghetto.

"Participant-observation," as Ulf Hannerz later pointed out, was the chosen method of anthropology, but when carried out in the urban slum, the boundary line between ethnography and sociology is "fuzzy."<sup>23</sup> How could it be otherwise? The clue to the fuzziness is no doubt in the experience of "slumming" itself the fascination which the urban poor have for visiting researchers, especially when the poor manifest their peasant origins. *How the Other Half Lives*, with all of its flaws—maybe because of its flaws—is, after one century, still a contemporary book of photographs and caricatures. Tom Wolfe's *The Bonfire of the Vanities* is a brilliant example of "the New Journalism," but re-reading Jacob Riis in 1990 simultaneously with Tom Wolfe exposes the continuity of that journalism, as well as the fuzzy line between journalism and social science.<sup>24</sup>

If Zorbaugh's *The Gold Coast and the Slum* (1929) bridged documentary journalism and documentary sociology, William Foote Whyte's *Street-Corner Society* (1943) made the claim for sociology proper. As personal as Bill Whyte's observations were of "Cornerville," the author strove always to incorporate his experience into an objective science. Almost all of Whyte's readers knew that "Eastern City" meant Boston, and that "Cornerville" meant the North End, but ascribing quasi—anonymous names to his places lent the sociological text a desired objectivity. The Harvard University graduate student overcame the profound social distance between himself and the Italian street-corner gangs, and that *rite de passage* resulted in an American sociological "classic."

A "classic" in the social sciences is not an accident. Like Malinowski's *Argonauts of the Western Pacific* (1922), Whyte's *Street Corner Society* has

22 E. Liebow, Tally's *Corner*, (Washington D.C.: a Study of Negro Streetcorner Men. London: Routledge Kegan and Paul, 1967); U. Hannerz, *Soulside* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1969).

23 Hannerz, *Exploring the City*, p. 10.

24 (New York: Bantam, 1988).

the intention of attaining a "classic" status, with the *rite de passage* of field-work being the medium for achievement.<sup>25</sup> To be able to cross over the dangerous borders of cultures and societies, to assume experience and insight into "the native's point of view" (Malinowski's phrase) became the essential quality of a classic text in the social sciences. The ethnographic "unique" had to elide with the sociological "universal" so as to imply a "micro/macro" relationship. The structure of Whyte's book suggests the micro/macro analogy. The first half is devoted to "the little guys," and the second half to "the big shots."<sup>26</sup> The rules of the group's organization and its relations to outsiders made plausible the connection between "little guys" and "big shots." Highly specific and small-scale cases are amplified first into larger organizations and finally into general sociological laws. Likewise, general laws become situated in the specific cases. Whyte could "zoom" from the society at large to the gangs in Comerville:

In a society such as ours, in which it is possible for men to begin life at the bottom and move up, it is important to discover who the people are who are advancing and how they are doing it.<sup>27</sup>

The naturalist novel of the nineteenth century could serve as the form for monographic social science in the twentieth century but with an important difference. The novelist pretended not to be "there", i.e. in the world of the characters. The social scientist, on the contrary, had to *prove* to have been there. Social scientific authenticity, the 'trademark of the "classic"', was assured by virtue of the author's presence in "the field", and, by a magical metonymy, "the field" became "the world."

William Foote Whyte's introduction to *Street Corner Society* sets the sociological stage for the detailed presentation to follow. The opening paragraph states:

In the heart of 'Eastern City' there is a slum district known as Comerville, which is inhabited almost exclusively by Italian immigrants and their children. To the rest of the city it is a mysterious, dangerous, and depressing area. Comerville is only a few minutes' walk from fashionable High Street, but the High Street inhabitant who takes that walk passes from the familiar to the unknown.<sup>28</sup>

The dramatic "few minutes' walk" of urban American journalism and sociology occurs in Riis, in Zorbaugh, and again in Whyte. All three writers

25 Wm. F. Whyte, *Street Corner Society: The Social Structure of an Italian Slum* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, [1943] rev. ed. 1955).

26 *Ibid.*, xix.

27 *Ibid.*, xviii.

28 *Ibid.*, xv.

address themselves to "us", that is, the "familiar." The slum is assumed to be "the other," and were it not for the Italians, the *paesani*, the slum would probably remain "unknown." The Italians represented and manifested their "otherness" so vividly that they could be perennially familiar *and* foreign. Another contemporary researcher of acculturation selected the Italians for a study, "because the investigator believed they would be among the more hospitable and communicative of the minority groups."<sup>29</sup>

The key term in Whyte's representation of Italian-Americans in Boston was "organization"—just as "disorganization" epitomized *The Polish Peasant in Europe and America*. "Leadership" was organized on the basis of patronage. Whyte noted that according to his informants in Cornerville, Irish political patronage was more solid than the Italian.<sup>30</sup> Family loyalties, however, were powerful among the Italians. "The network of family obligations," Whyte reflected, "extends far beyond that which is experienced by the middle-class native American."<sup>31</sup>

Whyte's facility at joining the concrete case with the abstract reflection ethnic interaction with "social structure," makes *Street Corner Society* a perfect document of its epoch: the New Deal in the United States. Whyte's discourse is pragmatic. He chooses his cases for their feasibility and adaptability for generalization. Whyte studied meticulously the ways his "street corner boys" interacted with the political structure. An illustration was the case of the missing fence in a small park where the "boys" played softball. Too many broken windows in an apartment building across the street resulted in an order that no boys over sixteen should be allowed to play ball. Three police arrived and "broke up a hotly contested game one Sunday afternoon."<sup>32</sup>

A series of negotiations between the "little guys" and the "big shots" took place not directly but with mediating figures, and the results were impressive. Within two months the City had financed the erection of a fence at the park. The "cooperation" between the local bank, which owned the apartment building, the Park Commissioner, City officials and the informal leaders of the ball teams got results. Whyte mapped the entire organizational structure of the local event, "Obtaining the Park Fence."<sup>33</sup> Whyte could use the case to formulate a general, pragmatic principle: "The securing of community improvement requires organization at the bottom and good connections at the top."<sup>34</sup> Thus, Whyte's method was both microscopic and telescopic. Its buoyancy and opti-

29 I. L. Child, *Italian or American? The Second Generation in Conflict* (New York: Russell and Russell, [1943] 1970), p. 5.

30 Thomas and Znaniecki, *The Polish Peasant*, p. 211.

31 *Ibid.*, p. 208.

32 Whyte, *Street Corner Society*, p. 248.

33 *Ibid.*, p. 251.

34 *Ibid.*, p. 252.

mism, above all its "good will," emanated from Franklin D. Roosevelt's New Deal.

The "muckraking" spirit has all but disappeared from Whyte's representation of the Italian slum. The sincerity of his informants and the personal conviction of the author create an intimacy and informality that are rare in sociological literature. When I refer to the scenes of *Street Corner Society* as "urban pastoral," I can speak of the slum atmosphere that can surprise us by its generous warmth: its ideal rural village quality. I can suggest as well the "pastoral" tone of the social scientist who brings that unknown world to our vision. Whyte always tries to let the informants speak for themselves in their own voice. Doc, the authentic street boy, tells the sociologist:

Bill, those settlement houses were necessary at first. When our parents landed here, they didn't know where to go or what to do. They needed the social workers for intermediaries. They did a fine job then, but now the second generation is growing up, and we're beginning to sprout wings. They should take that net off and let us fly.<sup>35</sup>

William Foote Whyte has portrayed the Italian street boys at the "bottom" of a social structure, but in our current jargon the boys were also "up front." Doc voices the desire for "upward mobility," not merely to rise in the social strata, but to be freed from the humiliation of middle class supervision. Their visibility and accessibility to the Yankee, middle class, social scientist has made Doc's and Chick's gangs immortal. *Street Corner Society* was meant to be a "classic," and it no doubt is one.

Our final version of a sociological representation of the Italian presence in American cities is Herbert Gans, *The Urban Villagers*, with its sub-title: "Group and class in the life of Italian-Americans."<sup>36</sup> In several respects, Gans' work is a reflected commentary to William Foote Whyte's book. Gans' "field" is not given a fictional name. The West End of Boston was neighbor to the North End, Whyte's "Cornerville." The West End's residents in the late 1950s were facing an immanent crisis: their neighborhood was slated for "slum clearance" and "urban renewal." Several research projects were underway, some of them in conjunction with the local "Save the West End" organizations. Gans' *The Urban Villagers* was the most systematic—and best remembered—social research from the crisis, one of the first monographs that attempted to uncover and protect a threatened urban community.

Whereas the North End was, and still remains, "Little Italy" in Boston, the West End's apartments were leveled and replaced by high-rise, high-cost buildings. When *The Urban Villagers* appeared in 1962, the informants had all been moved out of the neighborhood they belonged to for at least two genera-

<sup>35</sup> Ibid., p. 276.

<sup>36</sup> (New York: Free Press, 1962).

tions. Gans' book differs from Whyte's in its political perspective and style, if only because the New Deal atmosphere had dissipated in the 1950s.

The inhabitants of the West End at the time of Gans' field work were ethnically variegated, though 42 percent were first and second generation Italian-Americans.<sup>37</sup> The neighborhood was predominantly "blue collar," i.e. working class. Several of the newcomers to the West End were students and artists, who were attracted by the low rents and the proximity to Beacon Hill, Boston as well as to the Italian shops and restaurants in the North End. The West End lay in between the two districts.

Gans could focus on the Italian-American group not only because of its relative size, but because it could be compared with the more conventional images of Italian slum neighborhoods, including of course William Foot Whyte's *Street Corner Society*. The fact that the Italians in the West End were in transition—by choice and by force-made them ideal informants for the study of continuity and change in an ethnic community. Gans' book is nuanced in its method and its representations. Whereas Whyte directed almost all of his research at (male) organization and informal political power, Gans looked at "peer-group" culture, including both men and women. Whyte was definitely "street corner" centered; Gans went inside the homes of his informants. "Interaction" was a key term in both sociological monographs, yet Gans presented more fully the domestic interiors of the community. It is hardly a muckraking description:

The apartments were kept spotlessly clean, and although the living room and bedroom furniture was often that purchased at the time of marriage, kitchen equipment and other appliances were usually modern. The kitchen was normally the main area of social activity. The living room was used mainly to house the television set, and when visitors came, to allow the men to separate themselves from the women and carry on their own conversation.<sup>38</sup>

Not only is muckraking absent from this account, but pasteurality likewise fades out of the sociological imagery. Gans insisted that in many ways the Italian inhabitants of the West End resembled their ethnic and/or class counterparts in the suburbs. Instead of holding tightly to their Italian peasant origins, the second generation Italian residents of the West End were undergoing change.

Herbert Gans, moreover, could make use of recent American ethnographic studies of Southern Italian villages for his own comparative analysis. Edward Banfield's *The Moral Basis of a Backward Society* (1958) was one of Gans' chief sources for an understanding of West End familial loyalty and suspicion for outsiders.<sup>39</sup> Several American ethnographers who studied the Italian field

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 8.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 20.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 199-204.

documented the continuity of social structure. Thus, the second-generation West Enders could be situated on a cultural-structural continuum that included milieux of the Italian village and the American slum.

The third generation, Gans predicted, would continue the acculturation process.<sup>40</sup> He was aware that the acculturation process resulted from the coercion of the "slum clearance" plans for Boston's "re-development."

Gans, moreover, broke radically with the conventional wisdom that made Italian ethnic culture account for the conduct of the neighborhood's residents. Gans distinguished between "culture" and "social structure". The second generation persons were clearly experiencing an erosion of their Italian culture. They still preferred the cuisine of their childhood, but otherwise, they were forgetting their cultural habits. Nevertheless, "the social structure of the West End ... is still quite similar to that of the first generation."<sup>41</sup> Gans continues:

Social relationships are almost entirely limited to other Italians, because much sociability is based on kinship, and because most friendships are made in childhood, and are thus influenced by residential propinquity. Inter-marriage with non Italians is unusual among the second-generation, and is not favored for the third. As long as both parties are Catholic, however, disapproval is mild.<sup>42</sup>

I suspect that Gans' distinction between "culture" and "social structure" can be traced to Parsonian theory,<sup>43</sup> and that in a more praxis-oriented social science à la Bourdieu, the traits which Gans describes as part of the "social structure" are better understood in a discourse of cultural practice. Choosing one's wife or husband, choosing to continue to associate with one's childhood and neighborhood friends surely shape out a social structure. They also give form and content to a culture.

Quite perceptively though, Gans showed how the Italians in the West End were conducting their lives as members of the American working class, which itself was living through a profound cultural transformation. Moving out of the slum ghetto to the blue collar suburbs was one of the expressions of that cultural and structural change. Thus, Gans explicitly rejected the rhetoric of the slum that dated from the days of the muckrakers. His defense of the "neighborhood" against "slum clearance" made imperative a critique of Riis, Zorbaugh, and Whyte. There remains, however, in the West Enders' "nostalgia" a trace of the urban pastoral. Gans, of course, distances himself from that

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 34; see also, M. Gordon, *Assimilation in American Life: the Role of Race, Religion, and National Origins* (New York: Oxford, 1964).

<sup>41</sup> Gans, *Urban Villagers*, p. 35.

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>43</sup> T. Parsons, "Culture and Social System Revisited," in L. Schneider and C. Bonjean, eds., *The Idea of Culture in the Social Sciences* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1973), pp. 33-46.

nostalgia, but he quotes one of his informants perhaps with a grain of sympathy:

In the old days, there were no cars or luxuries, no one had anything ... people were communal. No one cared what anyone else did, they tolerated differences more.... Men and women knew their place; it was better then. Whether it's right or not, I don't know, but there was more fun.<sup>44</sup>

To conclude this survey of the Italian presence in American urban social science, it would seem that Herbert Gans in 1962 portrayed the final "exit" scene. The ethnic "revivals" of the 1970's, however, brought back the actors for another exuberant stage call. The third generation "ethnics" did not continue on the trajectory of their parents, as Gans and others expected. Ethnicities emerged and could be explicated in American life in the terms of Goffman's "impression management."<sup>45</sup> It was also possible to survey the histories of virtually every ethnic group, written often by a member of that very community.<sup>46</sup>

In any event, the privileged position of the Italians in the representation of ethnic continuity and culture was no longer viable. Mario Puzo, the author of the best-seller, *The Godfather*, rejected the South Italian picturesque and melodic imagery with which his people were portrayed. His autobiographical sketch tried to de-mystify the Italian character and presence.

As a child and in my adolescence, living in the heart of New York's Neapolitan ghetto, I never heard an Italian singing. None of the grown-ups I knew were charming or loving or understanding. Rather they seemed coarse, vulgar, and insulting. And so later in my life when I was exposed to all the clichés of lovable Italians, singing Italians, happy-go-lucky Italians, I wondered where the hell the moviemakers and storywriters got all their ideas from.<sup>47</sup>

If the Italian-Americans seemed to be the most visible and colorful ethnic group from Riis' New York, to Zorbaugh's Chicago and Whyte's Boston, Black and Hispanic culture took over the city "turf" in the 1970s. If we are to trust the fiction of Tom Wolfe's *The Bonfire of the Vanities*, the representation and practice of New York ethnicity can only be grasped in the theatrical and mass media. New York for Jacob Riis and for Tom Wolfe is a "scene."

In our day, at least at the urban food fairs, all the ethnic groups appear "picturesque", and everybody can enjoy their bagels, pizza, and tacos.

<sup>44</sup> Gans, *Urban Villagers*, p. 223.

<sup>45</sup> S. Lyman and Wm. Douglass, "Ethnicity: Strategies of Collective and Individual Impression Management," *Social Research*, Vol. 40, 1973, No. 2, pp. 344-65.

<sup>46</sup> R. Vecoli, "European Americans: From Immigrants to Ethnics," *International Migration Review*, Vol. VI, 1972.

<sup>47</sup> T. C. Wheeler, ed., *The Immigrant Experience: the Anguish of Becoming American* (Baltimore: Penguin Books, 1971), p. 35.